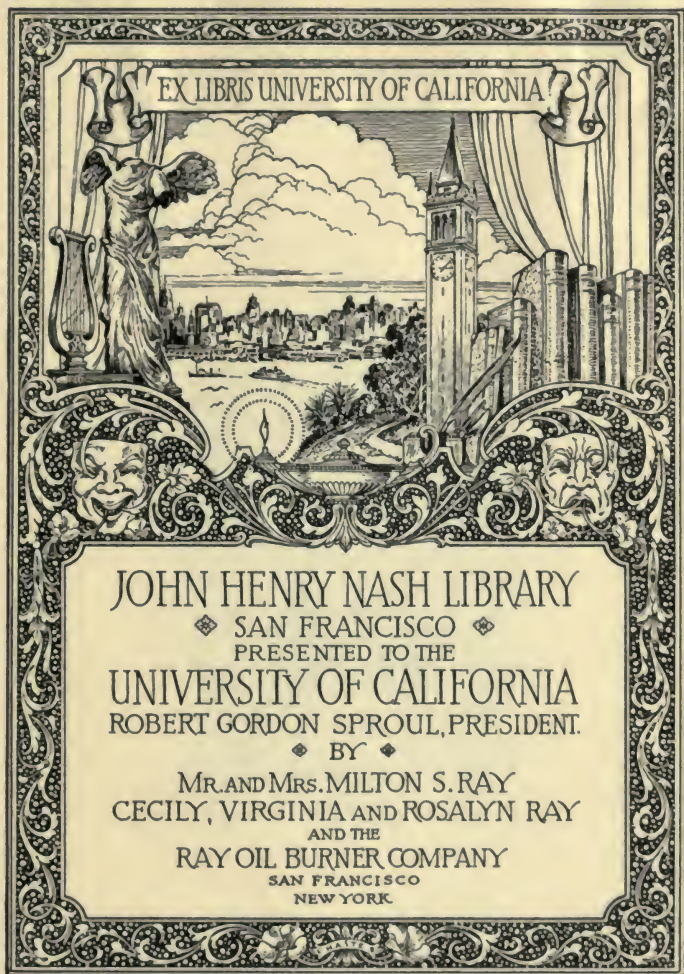


AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY WILLIAM MORRIS AT THE DISTRIBUTION OF PRIZES TO STUDENTS OF THE BIRMINGHAM MUNICIPAL SCHOOL OF ART ON FEB. 21, 1894.

The Bancroft Library

University of California • Berkeley







Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

**AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY WIL-
LIAM MORRIS AT THE DISTRIBUTION OF PRIZES TO STUDENTS
OF THE BIRMINGHAM MUNICIPAL
SCHOOL OF ART ON FEB. 21, 1894.**

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY WILLIAM MORRIS AT THE DISTRIBUTION OF PRIZES TO STUDENTS OF THE BIRMINGHAM MUNICIPAL SCHOOL OF ART ON FEB. 21, 1894.

IT seems to me that my address falls naturally into two parts: that I have first to speak to the general public about the Art which your School represents, and next I have to speak to the students of the School about their position and aims. As to the first part, I fear some of you may think I am telling an old story once more; a story of which you are tired of hearing, if I am not tired of telling it. For, to say the truth, we are not yet quite on the right road towards a satisfactory condition of Art. When I say 'we,' I do not mean this country in especial; for, indeed, at home here we are somewhat better off than in other civilized countries, though at first sight it may not seem so, owing to the fact that in France, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere, there are still more or less survivals from the foregoing periods, during which Art was common to the whole people. But those survivals are being extinguished under our very eyes, and in the course of a few years there will be nothing more interesting, e.g., in the peasant life of Italy, than in that of England or America. All nations of us must go through the mill in which the commercial period is grinding us; and England has at least this advantage: that she was thrown into the hop-

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

per first, and as a consequence is showing signs of consciousness that there is a future for Art. In short, we are willing to rebel against the tyranny compounded of utilitarianism and dilettantism, which for the greater part of this century has forbidden all life in Art. Only as yet we do not quite know what form our rebellion is to take; nor do I feel that in this business I can do more than generalize; for, in fact, if we already knew in detail what to do toward the furtherance of Art, that would mean that we were practising Art, & should not want to talk about it: people do not talk about matters that are going smoothly.

As to my generalizations, I can only say, first, that, in order to have a living school of Art, the public in general must be interested in Art; it must be a part of their lives; something which they can no more do without than water or lighting. We must not be able to plead poverty or necessity, as we do now, as an excuse for ugliness or dirt. If we raise a building, whether it be palace, factory, or cottage, it must be a thing well understood that it must be sightly: if a railway has to be run from one place to another, it must be taken for granted that the minimum of destruction of natural beauty must be incurred, even if that should increase the expense of the line largely; disfiguring waste of coal-pits or manufactories must be got rid of, whatever the cost may be; and so on. And, mind you, all this need of real public convenience, which is the only

possible foundation for Art in modern times, is quite possible to be done; and it will be done, so soon as people care about it. To put the matter quite plainly, as things go now we are, as a community, contented to be publicly poor so long as some of us are privately rich; therefore, though the income of the country is enormous in figures, no man of us can go a few yards from his own door without seeing the tokens of quite desperate public poverty. Now I admit that within the last dozen of years there are signs of healthy discontent with this monstrous discrepancy between our powers and our practice; and in one direction, especially, a new spirit has arisen, which, to begin with, has given us instruments through which the revolt against stupid utilitarianism can work. I am alluding to the development of municipal life amongst us. Without flattery, and as a matter of fact, I can say that of course I know how this city has for long taken a leading part in this development. But now we are seeing, what I think some of us scarcely expected to see, London playing its part herein; and that, in spite of its being so weighted by its unmanageable size, & its position as a centre of government, of politics, and of intelligence; that is to say, in spite of its being the very representative, of all places in the world, of the commercial epoch. Whatever mistakes the London County Council has made, or will make, I am sure that it is awake to the fact that it owes to the citizens some account

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

of the external decency of our brick-and-mortar county; & there is a feeling in the air (which used to be neither in the air nor anywhere else) that something may be done, even in these passing years, to make life better worth living in London. In short, we Londoners, who were once but citizens of the world, are now learning to be citizens of London also, as we surely ought to be; for, indeed, we have a certain amount of our own business to attend to, as well as other people's business.

All things considered, then, I believe, in a growing sense, that it is a disgrace to a period in which civilized mankind has attained to such mastery over the forces of Nature, that the commonwealth should be poor. Again, I say that such a feeling is, and must be, the basis of modern Art striving to free itself from the thralldom of utilitarianism, and 'the Correggiosity of Correggio.' How are we to work on that basis? In considering the question, I will, for a while, look upon the hopes of Art in these islands as the subject matter; & it is a more than sufficiently big one. And, first, let us dispose of the dictum, which used to be popular in dilettante circles, that the English are essentially a non-artistic people. I must call that a good deal less than a half-truth, & you have only got to go to the first (unrestored) mediæval building you can get at to test that view of the subject. As a matter of fact, until Art failed throughout civilization, the English had a very definite style of Art of their own,

which closely expressed their thoughts and their lives, and of which beauty, almost, it seems to us, unsought for, was an essential part; while as far as our own days go, it is, as I have said before, to non-artistic England that some glimmer of insight into the possible future of Art has come. In short, it is no use going further afield than this country to find the artists and craftsmen that we need: when you find them you will undoubtedly find that they have shortcomings which those of other countries have not; but also they will have their own special excellencies, which we had better make the most of.

Now, further, I believe that the capacity for Art, and the desire for it, are not yet extinct among us; yet they are mostly dormant. People in general, who do not earn their livelihood by using their eyes, do not use them; which, of course, considering the state of the popular arts amongst us, saves them a great deal of suffering, & probably lengthens their lives. But I fear that we cannot leave them to their negative happiness: if we are to make anything of Art, we must awaken in them that 'divine discontent' which is the mother of improvement in mankind. I have already admitted, indeed, that this awakening is beginning; but to me it seems that it is only amongst a very few, and chiefly amongst artists in the narrower sense of the word, that this discontent is the result of the actual use of the eyes. With the others of the discontented, it is

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

the result of intelligent reasoning: what might be called political understanding, as opposed to artistic. I do not undervalue this side of things, & it is indeed necessary that those who live chiefly by the eyes, should be able to use their intelligence also in dealing with matters of Art; but, nevertheless, the essential thing is that people generally should be capable of receiving impressions through the eyes, & this process should be a joy to them, just as their receiving impressions from their palates, or their ears. This is, of course, only stating the obvious fact, that the pleasure taken in Art is primarily sensuous; an obvious fact, yet not so obvious but that it is generally forgotten now-a-days.

Well, this being so, the necessity for using our eyes, if we are to be artists, having been admitted, the question comes, How are we to get people to use their eyes, always keeping in mind the fact that for some time after they have begun to do so they will be a torment to themselves and their neighbours? as I am.

That is the real question we have to consider this evening. And I begin to answer it by saying that we who have not lost the use of our eyes should go on pestering the rest of the public until we have more or less convinced them that it would be a good thing for them to recover the capacity of seeing, just as it would be a good thing to recover the use of their legs if they were lame; and remember that, as in the case of eyesight, the non-seeing ones

may plead that if they could see, it would give them trouble and pain, so, in the matter of legs, they might also plead that by gaining the capacity of walking they would incur the pain and labour of going afoot. Birmingham School of Art, 1894.

Well, having convinced our blind neighbours that it is a good thing to see, I think we should have won half the battle; because those who want to see, and do not really lack eyes, but only the habit of using them, can get to see, sooner or later, that is, can acquire the habit of seeing. And we who have not lost that habit are there to help them. Now, I have had a considerable experience in the art of propaganda, & I have, in the course of it, found out this that, having enunciated your first thesis, you must not wait till you have converted all people to that before you put out your second & your third, and proceed to act as if the said first were already accepted. So let us go by this experience now, & assume that we all agree (though we do not) that it is a good thing to have the full use of our eyes, and are prepared to endure the pain, as well as to enjoy the pleasure, which that use will give us; that we are, in short, prepared to accept the responsibility of being human beings in the full possession of healthy senses.

That being accepted, there comes, I say, the question as to how those who have not the use of their eyes, and desire to gain it, can be helped by those who have the said use. A far more difficult ques-

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. tion to answer than some of you may think. Nay, a question which cannot be answered unless people are seriously longing to be blind no longer, & are ready to pay the full price, both in money, and in trouble, and disturbance of a quiet life, which that (to my mind) inestimable gain will bring with it.

Now, I say that there are two things to be done by the seers for the non-seers: the first is to show them what is to be seen on the earth; and the next to give them opportunities for producing matters, the sight of which will please themselves & their neighbours, and the people that come after them. To train them, in short, in the observation and creation of beauty and incident.

What, then, is worth seeing on the earth? In one word, everything: this to love and foster, and that to hate and destroy. The results of the greed, tyranny, and injustice of man, of his folly, as the old Jew called it, these must be looked at in the face, as well as the results of his aspirations & his love. It is not to be lamented, but rejoiced in, that all those evil deeds of man, which I should sum up in the one word unneighbourliness, should leave their stain upon the Art which has struggled through them, or should leave the aching void of no-art when their slavery has been strong enough to destroy it; and, moreover, the disgust and grief with which we must regard these disgraces will, when we know the causes of them, give us assured hope

of the reward of fresh pleasure of the eyes that will accompany every casting off of the follies which still beset us.

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

But to-day I will not say much of those things which the eyes bid us hate, all the more as this is a festive occasion, and as also one ought to have more to say on the things which the eyes bid us to love, and which are less understood than the horrors above-said. Of these things which we of the present day ought especially to turn our eyes to for pleasure, there are, I take it, two kinds: the beauties of Nature, & the beauties of Art. Of the first, considered purely by themselves, I will say little: mainly this, that our fault in respect of regarding these is that for the most part we refuse to pay attention to anything in Nature which is not tremendous and exciting; it must be an Alpine pass, or a rocky sea shore, or the richness & luxury of an Italian landscape, or at the least a piece of mountain in Scotland or Wales: less than that will scarcely draw our eyes to beholding. Now, who would not be moved at such scenes as these? Yet, I must tell you that, if you can get no pleasure out of the sight of a Warwickshire meadow, or the hedgerows and little waving hills of my native Essex, or the flat fields and limestone banks of my adopted Oxfordshire-Berkshire land, I say, if these be nothing to you I doubt your capacity for really seeing the huge Swiss mountain and valley scenery, or the flank of the Apennine, or

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. the fairy-land of the Guarda Lake, or the terror of the Thrasymene. In short, what our modern landscape visitors usually fail to see, is a certain something which we call 'character,' which does not depend on either bigness, or roughness, or richness; a something which means the expression of a human interest, the telling of a tale of life and incident, one may say, the touching the imagination through the eye. Here, then, is already a gain for the purblind, if we can give them this faculty of seeing character in landscape; indeed, a far greater gain than the mere words just spoken can give you any idea of. By dint of this gain, almost every 'flat & uninteresting country' (as the phrase goes) is all changed, and becomes a fairy-land full of beauty and interest; & the lead of our ordinary English landscape becomes pure gold. Indeed, I will promise to any one of you that goes with open eyes some month or two hence into any unspoiled country-side, that you will find almost every field's end a paradise that will cry out to you in a voice not to be resisted: 'Love the earth which you dwell upon, and the soil which nourishes you.'

And, surely, when we have gained by the use of our eyes such ineffable pleasure as this, we shall no longer plead poverty for failing to keep this inheritance of our fathers free from spoiling and degradation; we shall not allow the passing convenience of the minute to deprive us all of what at

least should be public property, to wit, the beauty of the face of the land. Birmingham School of Art, 1894.

Now perhaps you will say that, even so far, I have not been speaking of the simple unblended works of Nature. That is true. In all old civilized countries, even when we are in the country, out of sight of a single house, the aspect of the place is largely influenced by the work of man: the hedge-rows, the road, the lanes leading out of it, the trees which have all been planted by men's hands, the growing crops, the tame beasts and sheep, the banked & locked river, all these go to making up the loveliness which lies before us. But, besides all that, it is seldom in England that we can be out of sight of a house, never out of memory of one seen but a little while ago. So here we are brought at once to that transition between works of Nature and of Art, wherein each plays its own part, and which, when they are happily harmonized, produce the greatest pleasure that the eye can have, & appeal most directly to the imagination. For in these landscapes, which include building, we have before us history in its most delightful, and even, I will say, its most instructive, shape. And, furthermore, in such landscapes England (in all countryside which have not been ruined by our artificial poverty) is fruitful; for both the circumstances of life in the middle ages in England, and the genius of our forefathers led them specially to what I should call the embroidery of the general face of

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. the country. If we lacked, as we did, the romance of the great walled towns of the continent, we had as a compensation abundance of ancient villages with their small but beautiful churches, full of individuality and character, and their generously-built manor houses & homesteads, which, between them all, once made an English country-side a special treasure not to be seen anywhere else. And grievous as has been the injury to this treasure-store, much as we have been robbed of it by our own folly and blindness, there is still enough of it left to teach us and delight us. And, mind you, here I am not speaking of the magnificent cathedrals of England, or the beautiful ruins of those vast monastic houses which still exist in the Yorkshire valleys, & elsewhere: those, like the mountains and lakes aforesaid are, I will not say generally valued, but at least generally catalogued by the public; but I am speaking of the familiar houses and little country churches which are scattered all over the land, most of the former of course not being actually mediæval, but traditionally fit and beautiful. Here, again, I say, if you do not feel the beauty of the little grey cottage, which has stood so many storms and evil days, and is still sound and trim; or of the little village church, brimful of the history of six centuries, you cannot feel that of the stately cathedral. And these, above all things, we want to get people to see with their eyes, and to value according to the amount of pleasure which

they will get from them when their eyes are open. Birmingham School of Art, 1894.
And, once again, as in the case of the fields & woods and hillsides, when they are in the full enjoyment of this pleasure, surely they will not forgo it for fear of that artificial poverty, which is an affair as purely conventional as the beauty of our ancient buildings is real & substantial. Yet you must not suppose that I am an advocate of the tumble-down picturesque. Keep your village houses weather-tight, trim, and useful; and where you must, build others beside them: but why, when you build these, should you make them specimens of the worst buildings in the worst suburbs of a modern town? Even in the passing day, if you build them solidly and unpretentiously, using good materials natural to their own country-side, & if you do not stint the tenant of due elbow-room & garden, it is little likely that you will have done any offence to the beauty of the country-side or the older houses in it. Indeed, I have a hope that it will be from such necessary, unpretentious buildings that the new and genuine architecture will spring, rather than from our experiments in conscious style more or less ambitious, or those for which the immortal Dickens has given us the never-to-be-forgotten adjective 'Architectooralooral.'

Now this matter of the proper understanding of Architecture is at the present moment of such overwhelming importance in the consideration of the future of the Arts that I must say a few more words

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. about it, even though it be in parenthesis. I mean, in plain terms, that the manner in which our buildings, and especially our houses, are built is really the foundation of the whole question of Art; and that, if we cannot build fit and beautiful (not necessarily highly decorated) houses, we cannot have Art at all in our days. Reflect on it! A picture may be hidden in a drawing-room; a book may remain unopened on a library shelf; a drawing or engraving shut up in a portfolio; but a house is always in evidence to injure every passer-by by its badness, or benefit him by its goodness. Neither can any work of Art, not even the greatest work of Art, a beautiful woman, look well in a bad house. Now that being the case, and our modern houses being undeniably, and even, it would seem, wilfully, bad, for the most part, let us, I beg of you once more, take every care of our old buildings, which are good. I say every care: not only do not pull them down in the interest of railways, manufactories, public-houses, and the like; but mend them so as to keep them weather-tight, and then leave them genuine. The history of what is called 'restoration,' of which I really must say a few words, gives such a curious instance of the non-use of the eyesight, that, apart from other matters, it quite belongs to the question.

From the time of Elizabeth to that of George IV the people of this country (indeed, of all Europe), though they had certain architectural (or at times

architectooralooral) tastes, were not in the least moved by the masterpieces of Mediæval Art; in point of fact, since they did not use their eyes on them, and since they were rejoicing at first in their newly-recovered treasure of classical learning, and later on in the acquirement of science so-called, they considered these mouldering heaps of stone to be mere relics of barbarism. In passing, I may say that the French travels of that very shrewd man of business and very complete Philistine, Arthur Young, give us an excellent measure of this stupidity. About the beginning of this century, a few people began to open their eyes to Mediæval Art, of whom by far the most remarkable was Walter Scott; and his obviously genuine love for these works, combined with the conventional idea that they were 'barbarous,' produced some curious and amusing passages in his books. However, admiration for the Gothic buildings grew, till at last people began to think that they would like to have some more like them, and tried it with very small success, though they were mightily pleased by their attempts. Again came a period which learned so much more about the Gothic style, as it was once called, that great and successful architects practised in it, producing buildings which did no great harm, when they did not take the place of old buildings. But in another direction this new knowledge had very bad consequences. By this time our ancient buildings, having been

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. both neglected & ill-treated by many generations, needed serious repair in many cases. The distinguished architects aforesaid undertook these repairs, and, as repairs, often did them very well. But they also undertook to re-do literally those parts which the neglect and stupidity aforesaid had injured or even obliterated, and seemed to have no doubt that they could do so. And they knew so much about the old buildings & the ways of their builders, that I cannot much wonder at their temerity. But what I do rather wonder at is, that they did not see, when they had thus 'restored' old work, that it did not look right; that, though their mouldings were identical of section with those of the 13th century, and though their carved foliage & figures were 'accurately' (Heaven help us!) copied from casts of that period, they did not look in the least like 13th century work; nay, that they could not build a plain wall at all like 13th century masons. I say that, if they had had the due use of their eyes, they would have seen this at once, and then fallen to reason as to why it was so; in which case, they would surely soon have found out that there were abundant reasons against the possibility of imitating the ancient work: the principal one being that since that time the whole structure of society has altered, and the position of the workman changed; that the long chain of tradition which was unbroken till the end of the middle ages has been snapped. And if they had once had

even a doubt that this was so, surely they would have held their hands, remembering the fatal risk they ran, if perchance they were wrong, of destroying that which they could never have again, the living expression of the very heart & soul of their ancestors. Unhappily they never brought their quasi-knowledge to the test of their eyesight, and therefore they have found their knowledge hopelessly insufficient to deal with the difficulties which have beset them, and the result has been that they have most seriously injured all the great cathedrals of England, & almost destroyed some; while of the parish churches, it is only here & there that one comes across one which has had only to contend against neglect and the 'churchwardenism' of the last two centuries, and has not had added to the conspiracy against its life the well-meant but disastrous attacks of the restorers. Now I appeal to you with some hope as intelligent, and in this case unprejudiced, observers, to help to put an end to this folly of restoration. If the guardians of old buildings are careful of the stability of these buildings, & will take care, and great and constant care, to preserve what they have got, they may safely leave the question of restoring them to what they have never been to a period when we have at last conquered a genuine style of architecture of our own, and let that age settle the question. I have no fear of the way in which they would settle it. I have no doubt that they would look upon these

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. buildings as sacred relics of the older days, whose tradition they had at last caught hold on, & whose suggestions they had developed in the period of their own genuine creations.

Meantime it seems to me there is another way in which the restorers neglect the evidence of their eyes as to the beauty of an old building. The buildings of the middle ages, especially those of what we may call the Northern Gothic, are far too sturdy and rational to be injured by fair wear and tear. Often, no doubt, some subsidence of the soil, or what not, may endanger an old building; but always, if it is well looked after, the said danger can be met by the engineering skill of the day, and the building may be made absolutely sound without any tampering with its surface; or a defective stone may be replaced by a new one where it is structurally necessary; but the surface in such buildings is so far from being damaged by the action of wind and weather, that, on the contrary, it adds a beauty to it: adds a beauty to its original beauties, mind. The lapse of time will not turn a bad building into a good, any more than it will turn bad wine into good, but it will most often make a good building very much more beautiful; because it will assimilate it to the surrounding nature, until it seems at last scarcely to have been made, but rather to have grown up from the very soil, an unartificial, inevitable growth. That any man should ever have ventured to risk the vulgarizing of all this accumulated

beauty, history, & romance for the sake of a piece of barren pedantry, fills me with a wonder that I have never been able to get over.

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

To guard our ancient buildings jealously, therefore, against brutal destruction and egotistical falsification, seems to me to be one of the prime duties of those who are trying to make people use their eyes; for if people cannot see these, they can see nothing, & they should acknowledge their defect and leave the dealing with such works to those whose eyesight is not defective.

Now I have gone over a few of the points with which it is necessary to deal, in considering how we are to get people to see Art, & the materials of Art. Of course I do not pretend that I have exhausted even the list of subjects; still I feel sure that by the time people have begun to see the face of the earth, and the works of mankind upon it that were done spontaneously, and with a pleasure which is still obvious upon them, they will find it necessary to do their share in the production of such works, & be impelled toward creation.

And that word brings me to what I have to say more particularly to the Art-students here present; for, unless you are acting in pure error, you have, in establishing & in fostering a School of Art here, accepted the position that it is desirable that people should be taught to use their eyes, & that, when they have learned to do that, in ever so little a degree, the natural result must be an irrepressible de-

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. sire to create works of art. And in the first place let medwell upon these words: An irrepressible desire to create. I always have warned, and always shall warn, when I have the opportunity, young people against looking on the practice of the arts as a mere profession, a career to be chosen for the earning of livelihood. I am often consulted on this point, and my answer is always the same: 'If you are quite sure that you have got in you the irrepressible desire, you need no test of capacity to begin with; you will yourself know that you have in you some power of creation; in that case do not hesitate, but throw yourself into it for better or worse, and take what will come. But if you do not feel that you have the capacity or desire, then, by all means, if you can, study Art as a recreation or a piece of education, but do not pledge yourself to live by it; for, if you do, you will be a burden to Art, & will, if you have the insight which a serious person ought to have, feel yourself to be in a false and ignominious position.' Now, this warning is more necessary than you may think, because most men who have any character or strength of will, can, by concentration and diligence, learn the practice of a profession for which they are not really fit; & this very commonly happens in the arts, and produces men who, as far as the arts are concerned, are mere mechanical pretenders, though not necessarily so wilfully. So, I say, make yourself sure that you have in you the essentials of an artist before you study Art as

a handicraft by which to earn your bread. But, again, if you are able to do this, & become a genuine craftsman, I congratulate you on your position, whatever else may happen to you, for you then belong to the only group of people in civilization which is really happy: persons whose necessary daily work is inseparable from their greatest pleasure. But, if I may sermonize you for a moment, remember that noblesse oblige: with such happy people as you are, we cannot put up with the follies and dishonesties which we forgive to less fortunate people, bishops, & prime ministers, and generals, and landowners, and great capitalists, & the like. You must be absolutely faithful to your Art, and, though I do not ask you to judge other artists severely, you must be hard with yourselves; and, though you may never be able to do your best, yet you must aim at doing so, and, I say, take yourselves, your better selves, for your judges, and not people who know nothing about Art, and whom you may easily hoodwink. Your position as modern artists makes this all the more imperative on you. To the mediæval craftsman generally, ornament was only incidental. If his ornament was not good (which by the way it almost always was), at least he was making a shoe, or a knife, or a cup, or what not, as well as ornament. But you who make nothing but ornament, please to remember that a piece of white paper, or an oak panel, is a pretty thing, and, don't spoil it. Well, that is all the ser-

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

Birmingham School
of Art, 1894.

monizing. As to how you are to set to work, I can but give you a few disjointed hints as to my opinions, which kindly take for what they are worth. It is clear to me that you have amongst you those who are using their eyes well in the direction of that sympathy with characteristic landscape which I spoke of before. This is already much; a whole school can be founded on such observation & sympathy, and again, as above said, such a school may have quite important results in teaching the general public to see. Now, I dare say you are being told that you are getting mannered; attend to that warning, though it may in some people's mouths mean nothing except that they have no eyes for the ornamental side of Art. The corrective to over-much manner is, first, diligent study of Nature, and, secondly, intelligent study of the work of the ages of Art. The third corrective is infallible if you have it; but you cannot all have it; it is imagination. But, at least, if you have not got it, do not pretend to it; or you had better give up Art altogether. Again, you will, I know, do things which will be called hard; you must look into that, but I will tell you that a design may be very clear and precise without being hard. I remember, e.g., the early nights in Iceland, where there was no shadow, and all was so clear that you could see every cranny in the mountains ten miles off, as if you could touch them, but there was nothing hard in it all. The hardness comes, I think, from using ugly lines,

wiry or edgy, or from over-shading, not from precision. Now, a word as to colour. One can only give warnings against possible faults; it is clearly impossible to teach colour by words, even ever so little of it, though it can be taught in a workshop, at least partially. Well, I should say, be rather restrained than over-luxurious in colour, or you weary the eye. Do not attempt over-refinements in colour, but be frank and simple. If you look at the pieces of colouring that most delight you in ornamental work, as, e.g., a Persian carpet, or an illuminated book of the middle ages, and analyze its elements, you will, if you are not used to the work, be surprised at the simplicity of it, the few tints used, the modesty of the tints, and therewithal the clearness & precision of all boundary lines. In all fine flat colouring, there are regular systems of dividing colour from colour. Above all, don't attempt iridescent blendings of colour, which look like decomposition. They are about as much as possible the reverse of useful.

As to those of you who are designing figure work, I would say, Do not spare yourselves in drawing from the living model, draped as well as undraped; in fact, draw drapery continually, for remember that the beauty of your design must largely depend on the design of the drapery. What you should aim at is to get so familiar with all this that you can at last make your design with ease, and something like certainty, without drawing from

Birmingham School of Art, 1894. models in the first draught, though you should make studies from nature afterwards. This, no doubt, is very familiar advice to you, so I will try to finish with something which is not quite so dead a platitude, and ask you to consider it. I have always noticed, in good mediæval designs, a peculiar kind of interest and ornamental quality, which is quite lacking in most of those of the Renaissance and of modern times. And this seems to me to be caused by the planes of the figures being very near each other in the mediæval designs, and their being separated from each other by long perspectives in the later periods, which latter method produces an emptiness and lack of interest which destroy all ornamental effect. When you go up to London, get over, if you can, to Hampton Court, and you will find a good example of what I mean there. The great hall, & the solar or drawing room are both hung with fine tapestries: those in the hall are of the Renaissance period, and fully illustrate this fault of emptiness; those in the solar are of the Gothic period, & each piece is quite stuffed with beautifully-draped figures. The hall tapestries look dull and vulgar, the solar tapestries full of interest and incident, and are the best possible ornament for the walls. The contrast is well worth noting, as both sets are fine of their kind. Well, if I were to go on saying all I really have to say, there would be no end to it. So I will end with saying that I, an old man now, have been much

encouraged with what I have seen of the enthusiasm, & aspirations toward the right road, of the Birmingham School of Art during the last few years, & I beg you to go on encouraging us of the last generation, so that the next after you may need no encouragement save what they will get from their own work, the pleasure of creating beautiful things, which is the greatest pleasure in the world. Birmingham School of Art, 1894.

Printed at the Chiswick Press, and finished on the 18th day of April, 1898. Published by Longmans & Co., Paternoster Row, London.

N 1450
M85

